

## REPORT FROM THE STRAIT OF JUAN DE FUCA

I am visiting Gary Geddes in his cliff-top home on the south-west coast of Vancouver Island, looking for whales to emerge from the waters of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and reading Gary's new manuscript. He is finishing the section about his efforts last August and September to follow the route that Hui Shen probably took from Kabul to Shanghai. The manuscript makes some striking revelations relevant to the film I want to make.

(1) It is obvious that the Hui Shen story is inspiring a very ambitious work about the Asian influence on the west coast of North America. It is an influence Gary has felt strongly since growing up in the east end of Vancouver. He is using Hui Shen as a metaphor for that influence.

*I have spent 27 years gathering materials about Hui Shen, studying the documents. I am spending almost a year on the road pursuing him. But Hui Shen spent a lifetime on the road. What had those years meant to him? I wonder how he dealt with the disasters he encountered along the way. While he had the consolations of philosophy, or belief, I have only my curiosity, which appears to have survived bouts of fear, dysentery and agony over the plight of refugees and the grinding poverty I've witnessed everywhere.*

But in this new book, Hui Shen is becoming even more than a metaphor. He is becoming Gary's own voice. Gary is creating a Hui Shen diary which appears throughout the book, and in which he expresses, in poetic form, his own observations about the state of the world. The form is similar to *biamwen*, a combination of verse and prose, narrative and lyrical, which blossomed in China when Hui Shen was alive. Gary has been trying all his life to marry story and song in his own work, and he likes to imagine that Hui Shen helped start that new form,

*spinning his tales of misadventure and flights of fancy like a frog transforming itself into a nightingale.*

Hui Shen's diary entries are the most original passages in Gary's book, and will, I think, ensure a prominent place for it in Canadian literature:

*I try to tell my story to the emperor, to render visible villages shrouded in mist or the great city shimmering and unreal in heat-waves. You'd think we did not speak the same language. It's no secret that the new emperor is having a crisis of confidence, wishes to abandon his divine calling for the monastic life. But I prefer ale to alms, parables to prayers.*

*Even the most jaded people would have been shocked to meet The People Who Give Everything Away (the Haidas), a tribe of barbarian big-time spenders who loved to make jokes at our expense and called us, among other things, maggot-eaters.*

*But nothing in classic texts compares with this place (Haida Gwaii) for grandeur. Ancient trees draped in moss. Rock slides altering the course of the fecund river. And moving alongside us, hooked black noses and red swollen bellies (homing salmon) breasting the river's tumult, destruction's sweet seed.*

*Pundits dismiss the world of action as a world of stones. But as a man of action, do I not marshal legions of words and send them marching against ignorance?*

Gary's obsession with Hui Shen also ensures that it will be the driving force of this film, and a force strong enough to make the film work no matter what the location. Gary hasn't found any new concrete evidence of Hui Shen's life to supplement the monk's own report to the Emperor, but that didn't weaken his resolve to follow the monk's footsteps through some very difficult terrain, nor diminish the importance of the story for his own life as a west coast writer. And it is on the ridges of Haida Gwaii where Gary would feel most inspired to tell this story to the camera.

For Gary, now in the process of becoming the world's leading exponent of the Hui Shen story, Haida Gwaii is as relevant to that story as Afghanistan, China or Mexico. It is as likely that Hui Shen was in Haida Gwaii as that he was in Kabul, Xian or Palenque. As clues of his life, we only have Hui Shen's own verbal descriptions of the locations he visited, as recorded in the Emperor's court records. No manuscripts, no petroglyphs have been found with his name inscribed, but there is no reason to believe that that they may not be found some day, even in Haida Gwaii:

*In Gilgit, Pakistan, I visited the Kargha Nala Buddha, carved into the cliff in the seventh century. It seemed an odd place to find such a well-carved Buddha, until someone discovered an urn stuffed with religious teachings, written in Sanskrit and stored in a cave a few minutes' walk up the hill. It pleases me to think there may be a cave somewhere in China or California or Haida Gwaii that contains a similar stash of writings by Hui Shen, a personal diary of his travels, perhaps, waiting to be discovered.*

(2) Gary was impressed with Afghanistan:

*Armies of Greeks, Huns, Arabs, Mongols and Persians have swept back and forth across the mountain ranges of Hindu Kish, leaving in their wake devastation, new religions, languages, art—all the remnants of culture—and, of course, an altered gene-pool..... From the fifties to the seventies, Kabul was a thriving modern city, a magnet for young travellers, where they could live cheaply and comfortably and where the drug laws were lax. It was a spiritual quest reclaiming old values, old rhythms, old intellectual jurisdictions. Kabul*

*was blessed with an eternally vernal equinox. The sunlight bathing the city still seems almost benign, as if it might be healing anything.*

But he was prevented by the Taliban regime from visiting the province of Bamiyan, the only place in Afghanistan where artifacts can still be found of the Buddhist civilization that once dominated central Asia. This is where the Taliban attempted last year to demolish the large statues of Buddha which had been carved out of the cliffs in the second century A.D.

By the time Hui Shen was born in the early fifth century, Bamiyan had become one of the most advanced societies of the time. Agriculturally rich, it was the hub of an endless stream of new peoples and goods and influences moving east and west along the Silk Road between China and the Bosphorus. It was the home of the Ghandaran school of art, which by blending the styles of Greece, Persia and India, produced the world's first sculptures of Buddha in an endless variety of human forms. Young Hui Shen would have been trained there as a monk.

So Gary feels that in order to complete Hui Shen's story, he is going to have to return to Bamiyan, now that the change of regime in Kabul has made it possible. He has heard that parts of the demolished statues are still standing, and that the chambers that were carved out of the cliffs around the statues to serve as monasteries remain largely untouched. He plans to go there in June. He is confident that his friend Yousef Asefi will be able to arrange safe passage for him to Bamiyan. Yousef Asefi is a medical doctor in Kabul who also happens to be one of the country's leading painters. He gave Gary a painting of Kabul in flames which has for Gary the same force as a Goya depiction of an execution.

Gary is inviting me to go with him to Bamiyan. Here is a chance to film images that would greatly strengthen the story of Hui Shen that Gary is prepared to tell on the ridges of Haida Gwaii. He is also ready to take me to places in China where filmed images could illustrate Hui Shen's passage through that country: the Bezelik monastery, for example, carved into the sandstone cliff on the edge of the Flaming Mountains, where Hui Shen would have stopped for spiritual renewal and rest after crossing the hot and dry Turpan Basin in western China. Some of the famous blue frescoes of Sakyamuni in the Bezelik caves date from Hui Shen's time, and have retained some of their original exuberance. Or the Magoa Shiku caves near Dunhuang, home of one of the world's most perfectly executed renditions of the reclining Buddha, a 50-foot sculpture which depicts him in eternal rest. Hui Shen would have studied here with China's leading scholars in economics, politics, history and art. 50,000 ancient manuscripts in these fields were discovered in the Magoa Shiku caves in 1900.

Before returning to Afghanistan in June, Gary will be following Hui Shen's route to Mexico, leaving Vancouver Island in a camping van in April and arriving in Palenque in May. He has invited me to go with him there, too. It is one of the wonders of the world, with 34 of the Mayan city's 500 vermillion-painted original buildings excavated from the engulfing rain forest. Gary was here as a young man, before he knew of Hui Shen, and was struck by the beauty of the Temple of Inscriptions in the early morning, as the sun lifted the veils of mist from the surrounding hills, and the monkeys began to howl. This time he will be looking carefully for Chinese heiroglyphics and Buddhist images of the sun, the tree and the serpent carved into stone panels, and especially for portraits of the shaman Kukulca. If captured on film, these images could also enrich tremendously the Hui Shen story as Gary tells it on the ridges of Haida Gwaii.

Haida Gwaii will be the climax of his journey and his book. He will be going there in July.

Here is the shooting schedule I propose:

May : Palenque (1 week)

June : Bamiyan, Turpan and/or Dunhuang (2 weeks)

July : Haida Gwaii (2 weeks)

Martin Duckworth  
French Beach, Victoria Island  
January, 2002



### Film Treatment

#### of the Queen Charlotte Islands

P The ridges connect the rugged west coast of northern Haida Gwaii with the settled interior around Masset Inlet. They rise above the tree line. They are covered with snow most of the year. In mid-June they are blanketed with moss, wild grass and sub-arctic flowers. Logging crews work the rain forest in the valleys below.

Four men are spread out over one of the ridges, obviously looking for something.

Gary Geddes is an experienced camper. His white hair establishes him as the oldest of the four. But he is a specimen of physical fitness.

Michael Nicholas Yagulenaas, in his forties, is a Haida artist well known for his opposition to clear-cut logging.

Ian Gould, in his thirties, is a white native of the island, who is an accomplished hiker and photographer, but earns his living as a logger.

Zhixiong He, also in his thirties, speaks broken English, but his enthusiasm is the group's driving force.

The four communicate through portable radios. From their radio exchanges, we get hints of what they are looking for.

We learn more when they return to camp and settle in for a long northern summer evening of cooking and conversation.

Over the 10 days they are together, through sun and rain, through discoveries and dead-ends, we learn about the life experiences, dreams and ambitions which have motivated them to come here.

We learn that Michael heard about the stone cairns from his great uncle, whose generation was the last to hunt for bear on the ridges. Michael talks while he sketches. He wants to do an animated film about Hui Shen. He has retired from the anti-logging movement to study Chinese calligraphy in Vancouver, but returns to Haida Gwaii in the summer to act as a guide at the historic site of Skungwaii, the ancient Haida village preserved by UNESCO.

We learn that Ian is one of the few living islanders who has been on these ridges before. He hiked here 10 years ago with his fiancée, on the eve of their marriage. She has since been ill with chronic fatigue syndrome, and Ian's photographs of the ridges have been images of health and hope for her. It was Ian's connection with the logging industry that made it possible for the group to get here by helicopter.